POLITICAL POLLS

by

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PUBLIC OPINION POLLS have played a part in past national elections but never so large a part as they are playing in the 1960 presidential campaign. The polls have been credited by political scientists and others with profoundly influencing, if not determining, the choice of this year's candidates for the presidency; the choice by the presidential candidates of their running mates; the issues to be emphasized and attitudes to be taken by the candidates in campaign speeches and debates.

Political polls continue to be looked upon by the general public as simple forecasts of aspirants' chances of nomination and candidates' chances of election, but they have become much more than that. National politicians who formerly made vital decisions on the basis of personal observation, counsel or pure hunch, now base their judgments on data supplied by the opinion specialists. The present-day candidate for high office has his own private polling organization. If its findings are favorable to his cause, he may give them to the press or have them leaked at a propitious moment; if the findings are unfavorable, they may result in drastic revisions of campaign strategy.

What has happened is described as belated utilization in the political field of the techniques and facilities long employed by business corporations to find best markets for their products, old and new, and more particularly to shape their products to the public taste.[1] Politicians have learned that private polls can help a presidential candidate pinpoint key areas and issues in a way not possible for the large nation-wide polling organizations. And limited polls are less costly—an important consideration for the less affluent office seeker. The cost varies from a range of $3,000-$7,500 for a "quickie" telephone poll of 600 people to $100,000-$300,000 for a nation-wide "sampling in depth." The most frequent users of private polls have been the candidates with the fewest financial worries. *Newsweek* estimated

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[1] "Pollsters Follow Business Lead," *Business Week*, March 26, 1960, p. 29.

(Aug. 31, 1959) that Nelson A. Rockefeller had more than
134 voter surveys made before his election as governor of
New York in 1958. Sen. John F. Kennedy (D Mass.) is
known to have had pollsters at work ever since his failure
to win the Democratic vice presidential nomination in 1956.

INFLUENCE OF POLLS ON POLITICAL CANDIDACIES

The first indication of the important role polls would play
in the 1960 campaign came more than a year ago, on Aug.
3, 1959, when Gov. Rockefeller, then regarded as a prob-
able competitor with Vice President Richard M. Nixon for
the Republican presidential nomination, told newsmen in
a confidential briefing during the Governors Conference in
Puerto Rico that he would decide in November whether or
not to run after seeing where he stood in the public opinion
polls.   Publication of this news brought a round of criti-
cism of Rockefeller, even from the opinion specialists them-
selves.   Louis Harris of Louis Harris and Associates, Ken-
nedy's private pollster and a recognized leader in business
polling, questioned the governor's timing of such a decision
12 months before the 1960 election.   Elmo Roper called
Rockefeller's course a "mistake."   He said the governor
"ought to make up his mind whether the things he believes
in are more likely to come about if he is President rather
than Nixon."   If the answer was "yes," he should enter
the lists regardless of what the polls might show.

At an Albany press conference, Aug. 17, Gov. Rockefeller
sought to reverse the impression newsmen had gained at
the conference in Puerto Rico.   Asked to comment on a
statement by Nixon that his own decision would not be
based on the polls, Rockefeller said:

> It has been widely attributed to me that the converse of that
> was the case as far as I was concerned. I should like to state
> that I have never made such a statement. I think political public
> opinion polls today are a reality of political life but obviously they
> are only a factor in trying to understand public trends and public
> reaction. My personal feeling is that while the public is inter-
> ested in polls they are not a factor in anybody's decision.

Despite the governor's disavowal, it was the general opin-
ion of political observers that Rockefeller's decision not to
run, announced on Dec. 26, 1959, was due primarily to his
poor showing in the polls.[2] On the Democratic side, Adlai

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[2] A Gallup poll of Republican voters in July had given Nixon 61 per cent, Rocke-
feller 18 per cent, others 21 per cent; a Gallup poll in December gave Nixon 66 per
cent, Rockefeller 19 per cent.

Stevenson's reluctance to announce for the presidency was attributed in part to the steady climb of Kennedy in the published polls.[3]

There is little doubt that Kennedy's candidacy was greatly influenced by voter surveys both public and private. Richard M. Scammon, director of elections research for the Governmental Affairs Institute, has said "The polls have had a bearing on this campaign from the day after Jack Kennedy lost the vice presidential nomination in 1956. . . . The polls were a very definite part of the creation of the image of Sen. Kennedy as the front-running candidate for the Democratic nomination."[4] One of the first uses of poll results by Kennedy was private circulation in 1956 of a canvass which purported to show that a Catholic candidate would get 7 to 10 per cent more votes than a non-Catholic candidate. Gallup had reported earlier (March 11, 1955) that 69 per cent of the voters would approve a Catholic President compared to 62 per cent in 1940.

USE OF POLLS IN CHOICE OF PRIMARIES TO ENTER

Joseph Alsop wrote in his syndicated column of July 27, 1959, that Kennedy's whole strategy was keyed to the polls, and that they showed him to be a popular figure in nearly every section of the country. By the time Kennedy named the state presidential primaries he would enter (Feb. 3, 1960) he had in hand a sheaf of polls by Louis Harris which indicated that he was running ahead in every one of the states chosen. They were Indiana, Maryland, Nebraska, New Hampshire, Ohio, Oregon, West Virginia and Wisconsin.[5]

On the Republican side, the polls may have had a psychological bearing on Nixon's decision to enter the Indiana primary on May 3 as an apparent underdog. Nine days before the balloting, Nixon backers announced that a poll by Claude Robinson of Opinion Research Corporation of Princeton, N. J., indicated that their candidate would trail Kennedy in Indiana, 52 to 48 per cent. Although the three Democratic candidates actually received more votes than the two Republican candidates, Nixon supporters claimed

[3] Gallup polls in January 1959, September 1959 and May 1960 showed the Kennedy-Stevenson ratio among Democratic voters moving from 25-29 to 30-26 to 41-21.

[4] Richard M. Scammon, interviewed Sept. 20, 1960, on Westinghouse radio stations.

[5] Stevenson's entry into the 1956 California primary, which was the first clearly to establish him as the Democratic front-runner in that year, was widely attributed to a private poll taken by his supporters forecasting the eventual outcome in that state.

a major victory with 47 per cent of the total vote compared to 41 per cent for Kennedy. The widespread feeling that Kennedy lost prestige while defeating Sen. Hubert Humphrey (D Minn.) 56 to 44 per cent in the Wisconsin primary was clearly a result of pre-primary polls which had indicated that Kennedy held a 60-40 advantage.

Rockefeller's decision not to enter the New Hampshire primary, first in the nation, may have been due in part to results of a poll which gave Nixon 74 to Rockefeller's 11 per cent of Republican votes. L. Richard Guylay, a public relations expert, had been reported canvassing key states for Nixon as early as August 1959.

EFFECTS OF SURVEYS ON PRE-CONVENTION TACTICS

Poll results are known to have brought sharp shifts in campaign strategy. W. H. Lawrence reported in the *New York Times* (Apr. 19, 1960) that a sudden Kennedy decision to attack Humphrey directly and to bring the religious issue into the open in West Virginia was the result of a Harris poll which showed that the odds had dropped from about 70-30 in favor of Kennedy in January to about 50-50 in April. In an apparent effort to picture himself the underdog, despite a private poll showing him back in the lead, Kennedy said five days before the primary that he would be glad to receive as much as 40 per cent of the Democratic vote. In the actual voting on May 10 he got 61 per cent, Humphrey 39 per cent.

Kennedy reportedly used results of his own private surveys to persuade some potential opponents that it would be dangerous to challenge him in certain primaries. Joseph Alsop wrote in his July 27, 1959, column that a favorable Harris poll of Ohio voters was behind Kennedy's threat to run in that state against Gov. Mike DiSalle. It was DiSalle who gave Kennedy his first big break by announcing on Jan. 5, 1960, that the Massachusetts senator would get all 64 of Ohio's delegate votes on the first convention ballot.

In New York, Michael H. Prendergast, the Democratic state chairman, sought to use poll results to create a bandwagon psychology for Kennedy. On June 25 he predicted that Kennedy would get New York's entire 114-vote delegation although Kennedy had received only 89 votes in a caucus on that day. Prendergast cited a poll of 1200 persons by John F. Kraft Inc. showing that against Nixon,

Kennedy was the choice of 58 per cent of the persons interviewed. A charge that part of the poll results had been withheld brought the disclosure that among Democratic voters interviewed, 44 per cent had favored Stevenson to 38 for Kennedy. But the bandwagon was already rolling and on the first ballot at the convention in July Kennedy received 104½ of New York's delegate votes.

On the Republican side, Nixon's consistent air of complete confidence was a reflection of his consistent lead in the polls over potential competitors for the G.O.P. nomination. Gallup polls in the spring of 1960 which showed Kennedy leading Nixon for President were dismissed by Nixon supporters as merely reflecting a lack of publicity due to the one-sided Republican nomination race.[6]

Polls are believed to have played an important part in the choice of this year's vice presidential nominees. Prior to the Democratic convention, Harris conducted a poll to determine who would give most help to Kennedy as his running mate. Kennedy's surprise choice at the convention of Sen. Lyndon B. Johnson, the Senate majority leader, for second place on the ticket was widely attributed to results of Harris' survey. In the Republican camp, the selection of United Nations Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge coincided with several surveys of the support for potential Nixon running mates which showed Lodge second only to Rockefeller who had repeatedly ruled out any possibility of his accepting the vice presidential nomination.

A charge of deceptive practice in polling was leveled against Nixon forces in California three days after Nixon's nomination. At the convention of state Democrats in Sacramento on July 30, State Attorney General Stanley Mosk accused Nixon workers of planning a telephone survey disguised as a public opinion poll in an effort to pinpoint the estimated 20 per cent of the state's Democratic voters needed to carry the state for Nixon in November. Mosk called the alleged plan "a deceptive and flagrant abuse of the public opinion polling process."

USE OF CANVASSES IN FIXING CAMPAIGN STRATEGY

One of the greatest services of voter surveys to candidates is the help they give in identifying what Harris calls

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[6] On April 7, President Eisenhower said the lack of Republican opposition was what had lowered Nixon's standing in the polls but that this handicap would be removed once Nixon was nominated and free to campaign with his accustomed vigor.

"the cutting edge" issues that separate one candidate from another in the minds of citizens. Evidence of the growing use of polls for this purpose is abundant in appendix pages of the daily *Congressional Record* which display the results of numerous polls conducted by members of Congress to learn what the "folks back home" are thinking on various public issues. According to Samuel Grafton, a former newspaper editor, "One eastern senator regularly has the voters in his state quizzed on a list of ten different public issues, to find out to which they react most warmly." The senator then "becomes 'hot' about the issues he finds produce a temperature in the voters." [7]

Harris has written that "by 1958 polling was used in roughly two out of every three campaigns for the U.S. Senate and in about half the campaigns for governor." [8] Among the persons named by Harris as having used polls to determine key issues and plan campaign strategy were Sen. Frank Church (D Idaho), Sen. Vance Hartke (D Ind.), Sen. Eugene J. McCarthy (D Minn.), Sen. Hugh Scott (R Pa.), Gov. Christopher Del Sesto (D R.I.), Gov. Robert B. Meyner (D N.J.), Gov. Edmund S. Muskie (D Maine), Gov. Rockefeller (R N.Y).

Harris has said that Frank Church learned from a 1956 poll, when campaigning for his present Senate seat, that "if he ran with high moral indignation against his Republican opponent in the Idaho Mormon belt, he could win." One favorable poll made it possible for Church "to raise funds for an otherwise almost empty campaign treasury." Harris credits polls with having played a part in Eisenhower's switch to emphasis on Korea in his 1952 campaign which "unquestionably widened his margin of victory." The late Sen. Robert Taft is reported to have been persuaded by results of a survey by Richard Guylay to emphasize liberal aspects of his record in the 1950 state election which he won so handily.

IMPACT OF POLLS IN PAST PRESIDENTIAL CONTESTS

The example most frequently cited to show the perverse effects public opinion polls may have in presidential campaigns is the 1948 contest between Thomas E. Dewey, then Governor of New York, and President Harry S. Tru-

[7] Samuel Grafton, "The Polls Grow—Should They?", *New York Times Magazine*, Feb. 21, 1960, p. 15.
[8] Louis Harris, "Techniques of Modern Politics," *Politics U.S.A.* (1960), p. 257.

man. As to Dewey's strategy of not speaking out on the issues, Jules Abels, author of a book about that election, has said "the role of the polls was only to assure the Dewey people that such a strategy would be safe." [9] Abels quotes Harold E. Stassen as having said that on a visit to warn Dewey that he faced a formidable foe, the G.O.P. candidate smiled and pulled out the advance release of an Elmo Roper poll with the remark, "My job is to prevent anything from rocking the boat." The polls seem to have had an opposite effect on Truman, causing him to embark an an extensive, hard-hitting campaign which contributed mightily to his victory in November.

In post-election analyses, the polls were even considered to have had an unnatural cumulative effect on supposed political experts. Abels reported that one *New York Times* correspondent, when asked why predictions of the result had gone so far wrong, replied: "I believe the widespread publication of public opinion polls was largely responsible for the opinions [favorable to Dewey] given me. Correctly or incorrectly, usually reliable political dopesters simply let Gallup do their thinking for them." [10]

It is generally agreed that the polls played a role in Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower's victory over Sen. Taft in the 1952 contest for the G.O.P. nomination. An Associated Press dispatch reported on June 27, 1952, that Taft had outscored Eisenhower in the 12 Republican primaries, 2,785,990 to 2,115,430, but Eisenhower won the nomination on the strength of polls that convinced the delegates that he would run better than Taft among independents whose votes would be needed to carry the election.

There is evidence also of poll influence in the 1956 presidential contest, beginning with the Florida Democratic primary in May. Publication of a Gallup poll showing Stevenson favored over Sen. Estes Kefauver (D Tenn.) was reported to have brought Kefauver's shift to a personal attack on Stevenson in the last week of the. Florida campaign.[11] This change in tactics may have been the beginning of the end for Kefauver, for in the subsequent California primary, Stevenson received 63 per cent of the Dem-

[9] Jules Abels, *Out of the Jaws of Victory* (1959), p. 149.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 274.

[11] Charles A. H. Thomson and Frances M. Shattuck, *The 1956 Presidential Campaign* (1960), p. 54.

ocratic votes, dooming Kefauver's chances and virtually clinching the nomination for himself.

In the same year, the Republicans became involved in a battle of polls to determine who should be the G.O.P. nominee for Vice President. Stassen opened the controversy with a press conference on July 23 at which he advocated the nomination of Massachusetts Gov. Christian Herter. An Eisenhower-Herter ticket, said Stassen, would run at least 6 per cent stronger than an Eisenhower-Nixon ticket. He explained that his figure came "primarily from a Gallup poll . . . cross-checked by some private polls I have made in order to verify it."

On the Saturday before the Republican convention, Stassen again voiced his opposition to Nixon at a press conference. Immediately afterward, he was challenged by party leaders who cited a private poll of their own that had yielded results highly favorable to Nixon. The latter poll, conducted by Robert Maheu Associates for the *Manchester* (N.H.) *Union Leader*, showed Eisenhower-Nixon preferred to Eisenhower-Herter by 54.3 to 25.7 per cent. Party officials directed attention also to Gallup polls that had shown Nixon far ahead of Herter among both Republicans and independents. The Nixon-support polls apparently offset the polls on which Stassen had relied, and Stassen wound up nominating Nixon at the convention.

Canvassing Methods and Poll Results

A PRINCIPAL REASON why political polls have become so controversial is the inevitable comparison of their findings with election results. Most pollsters try to soften the possible impact of such comparisons by emphasizing the temporal nature of a poll with such caveats as Gallup's: "If the election were held today . . ." The numerous polling organizations which conduct both business and political polls are well aware of the danger of losing business customers if a political survey goes wrong.

Walter Gerson, president of Walter Gerson and Associates, a marketing research organization, said Sept. 29 that he would be "scared to death" if responsible for a

nation-wide poll on this year's presidential election. The complications of the religious issue, and the size of the vote still reported as "undecided," made poll-taking this year an "explosive and dangerous thing."

Whenever the polls seem to err beyond a small margin, they become the target of criticism and ridicule, with calls for investigations of their operations by Congress. Despite frequent attempts to explain how the polls work much mystery continues to surround them.

DEVELOPMENT OF OBJECTIVE METHODS OF SAMPLING

Methods of canvassing voter attitudes have been drastically revised since the straw vote in 1936 that brought the demise of the *Literary Digest*. The development of present-day polling methods is usually divided roughly into three stages: the pre-*Digest* period of straw balloting; the 1936-1948 period, which introduced quota sampling; the post-1948 period, which brought probability sampling.

Testing voter attitudes through personal interviews did not become a business until the middle 1930s. While the *Literary Digest* was cooking its goose in 1936, the Gallup, Crossley and Roper polls gained solid reputations overnight by predicting, although underestimating, the sweep of F. D. Roosevelt's reelection victory.

Prior to 1936, straw polls enjoyed a good reputation, for the *Digest* had come within 1.4 percentage points of predicting Roosevelt's victory in 1932.[12] And since that time leading newspapers, particularly the *New York Daily News* and *Chicago Sun-Times*, have come remarkably close in regional polls. But the professional pollsters began to see basic flaws in the straw ballot method in 1936 and no longer use it in national surveys. They blamed the *Digest's* huge error on an excess of ballots from upper-income people whose names had been compiled from telephone books and magazine subscription lists. They did not quarrel with the number sampled—2,375,000 ballots was phenomenally high—but with the failure to obtain a representative cross-section of voters.

To get more representative samples, Gallup, Crossley, Roper and others adopted the use of quotas of population groups which were drawn up to conform to the actual

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[12] See "Measurement of Public Opinion," *E.R.R.*, 1940 Vol. II, pp. 347-351.

GALLUP POLL RESULTS AND SIGNIFICANT EVENTS

	Nixon	Kennedy	Spread
August 1959	48%	52%	4
September 1959	51	49	2
November 1959	53	47	6
January 1960	53	47	6
(New Hampshire primary March 8)			
March 1960	50	50	0
(Wisconsin primary April 5)			
April 1960	47	53	6
May 1960	46	54	8
(Indiana primary May 3, West Virginia primary May 10)			
June 1960	51	49	2
July 1960	48	52	4
(Party conventions)			

	Nixon-Lodge	Kennedy-Johnson	
August 17, 1960	53*	47*	6
August 31, 1960	50*	50*	0
September 14, 1960	49*	51*	2
(First Nixon-Kennedy TV Debate Sept. 26)			
October 11, 1960	49*	51*	2

* Including undecided voters in same ratio as decided voters. Gallup reported a Republican-Democratic, undecided split of 50-44-6 on Aug. 17, a 47-47-6 tie on Aug. 31, a 47-48-5 division on Sept. 14, and a 46-49-5 split on October 11.

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voting population of the country as shown by census data. For example, Gallup makes sure that his sample has approximately the same proportions of men to women, Negroes to whites, Catholics to Protestants, as has the general population. Other factors used are occupations, income levels, age, education, size of city and whether in an agricultural or industrial region.[13]

Under the quota system, each interviewer is given a list of person-types which conforms to a set pattern, and he must ring doorbells until he has talked with the required quota of each group. Theoretically the sample becomes a cross-section of the voting population. The main disadvantage of the quota system is that it is not possible to include and weigh all the factors that go into a voter's choice and at the same time get truly random samples.

In efforts to counteract this and other disadvantages that became apparent after the Dewey-Truman poll debacle of 1948, some polling organizations added a "probability factor" by which interview areas were picked in a mathematically random manner. Under Gallup's system, indi-

[13] George Gallup, *A Guide to Public Opinion Polls* (1944), p. 26.

viduals within these areas "are selected by starting from a randomly selected starting point and following a systematic procedure in the choice of households and the person within each household." [14]   Such a system attempts to add a random factor but it is limited by the adjustments necessary to make it conform to the population pattern.

Thus, in even the most scientific polls, there is a mixture of both quota and probability factors.   It is impossible to obtain a true probability sample of American voters because of prohibitive costs and lack of a master list of the total population from which names and addresses would have to be chosen at random for interviewing.   Quota sampling in itself leaves much to be desired.   After a detailed analysis of the use of population subgroups, opinion specialists Stephan and McCarthy concluded that "as it is, we are now forced to resort to intuitive judgment and general theory instead of definite information about the major factors that affect the accuracy of a particular survey."

SIZE OF SAMPLE AND NORMAL MARGIN OF ERROR

The size of a sample and expected margin of error in random selection is determined by the laws of probability first laid down by Bernouilli in 1713.   If, for example, 1500 beans are scooped from a bin of equally divided black and white beans, the beans scooped out would fall within approximately 3 per cent of an even split in 19 out of 20 cases.   Once out of 20 times, the margin would be greater than 3 per cent.   If the 1500 sample were doubled, the percentage of error would go down but only slightly because the reduction is only the square root of the factor by which the sample is increased (in this case the square root of 2).

Many critics of polls maintain that 1500 is much too small a sample on which to judge the 107 million persons of voting age in the United States because each percentage point would represent only 15 people.   But pollsters point out that the representativeness of the sample is more important than its size since the theoretical margin of error varies so little as the sample is enlarged.   Gallup usually uses a national sample of 1500 because it is a manageable number and has a relatively low theoretical margin of error.   George Belknap, consultant on polls for the Democratic National Committee, says the normal actual margin

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[14] George Gallup, *How a Public Opinion Poll Is Conducted* (1960), p. 1.

of error in any political poll is at least plus or minus 5 per
cent, rising to 6 per cent or more once in every 10 polls.[15]

In Belknap's view, the fluctuations in polls from month
to month are not necessarily trends and cannot justifiably
be linked to preceding news events in the manner attempted
by some pollsters. The fluctuations in pluralities in Gallup
polls since August 1959, as shown in the table on page 754,
fall well within Belknap's estimate of simple random
error in political polls.

Newspaper columnist Joseph Alsop has become something
of an expert on polls. Of the Aug. 17 Gallup poll he has
written that if the actual raw results were revealed by
Gallup, they would show approximately 640 of the persons
interviewed supporting Kennedy and only 610 for Nixon,
with about 350 undecided. Alsop says Gallup arrived at
opposite results through necessary adjustments for such
things as non-voters, "leaners," electoral vote imbalance,
and persons who lie about their choice because of the reli-
gious issue. He does not dispute the necessity of such
adjustments, but criticizes Gallup's reluctance to explain
them in his newspaper presentations of results.[16]

The accuracy of a poll depends on such things as the
skill of the interviewer, the wording of the questions and
whether persons interviewed will actually cast their ballots.
In summing up the countless variables, Harris concludes:
"One can only list some of the errors, measurable and not
measurable, which make precise predictions scarcely more
than an informed guessing game." [17]

DEGREE OF POLL ACCURACY IN FORECASTING ELECTIONS

In presidential elections other than the Dewey-Truman
election of 1948 the professional pollsters have pointed to
some remarkably close estimates. In 1944 Elmo Roper
came within .1 percentage point of Roosevelt's vote and
Gallup missed by only 1.8 percentage points. Because of
their success in 1944, the pollsters went into the 1948
campaign with great confidence.

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[15] Belknap is a professor of psychology on leave from the University of California.
He is now traveling with Kennedy to help him determine the value in terms of votes
of crowd responses to positions taken in the candidate's speeches.

[16] Joseph Alsop, "Dissection of a Poll," *The New Yorker*, Sept. 24, 1960, pp. 170-
184.

[17] Louis Harris, "Election Polling and Research," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Spring
1957, p. 115.

On the eve of the 1948 election, all polls agreed that Dewey would win handsomely. Roper halted operations with an announcement on Sept. 9 that Dewey was so far ahead (52.2 per cent to 37.1 per cent) that there was no need of further polling. Crossley had it 49.9 per cent for Dewey, to 44.8 for Truman, 1.6 for Thurmond and 3.3 for Wallace. Gallup had 49.5 for Dewey, 44.5 for Truman, 2.0 for Thurmond, 4.0 for Wallace. In the election, Truman received 49.9, Dewey 45.3, Thurmond 2.4 and Wallace 2.4 per cent of the total vote.

In general, the pollsters blamed their errors in 1948 on failure to poll voters right up to the last minute. They believe there was a large shift to Truman in the final stages of the campaign. Gallup, for one, chose to look at the overall record: "The average deviation for the seven elections beginning in 1936 through 1948 was 3.9 percentage points. These comparative figures bear evidence of the progress made in polling accuracy in recent years."

In the five national elections from 1950 through 1958, Gallup's "average deviation" was 1.7 percentage points. He has done better in congressional elections than presidential elections, being off on the popular vote by only 0.7 points in 1950, 1.2 in 1954 and 0.5 in 1958. Because Gallup is the most prominent figure in the polling field, however, both his accuracy and his methods come under attack in campaign years.

CRITICISMS OF SYNDICATED POLL PERFORMANCE

Sen. Albert Gore (D Tenn.) has made two speeches on the floor of the Senate this year in which he has asserted that Gallup missed the 1952 election results by a significant amount. The final Gallup poll in 1952 listed Eisenhower with 47 per cent, Stevenson 40 per cent and undecided 13. Then in apportioning the undecided vote according to past patterns, the poll wound up with two possibilities, a 51-49 margin for Eisenhower or a 50-50 split. In the election, Eisenhower got 55.4 per cent, a difference of either 4.4 or 5.4 points.

In an advertisement after the 1952 election, Gallup said: "The Gallup Poll is happy about its report on the election. It's nicer to eat pheasant than crow." An accompanying chart compared his 47-40 Eisenhower-Stevenson ratio favorably with the actual election results, but failed to note

the poll's 50-50 division when account was taken of the undecided vote.[18]

Gallup and others occasionally slip into the easy distortion of referring to the difference between estimated and actual per cent figures as "per cent" error rather than percentage point error. Jules Abels and Sen. Gore, among other critics, have pointed out, for example, that the difference between Henry Wallace's estimated and actual vote in 1948 was not 1.6 per cent as claimed (4.0 predicted less actual of 2.4) but was really 40 per cent (4.0 divided into 1.6).

Some authorities on polling prefer to use what they call a "plurality error" to measure accuracy of predictions. This is based on the fact that even in landslide elections the margin between winner and loser is hardly ever more than 60 to 40. Under the plurality-error system, a 60-40 split which was predicted as 52-48 is described as a 25 per cent plurality error (16, the difference between pluralities of 20 and 4, divided into 4, the predicted plurality).

Most critics feel, however, that such fine measurements are academic in view of the combination of confusion and ignorance that prevails in the public's opinion on public questions. Sen. Gore, for example, cited a poll of 150 housewives on the Mann Act, in which only 12 per cent of them identified it as the white-slave law and 38 per cent favored its outright repeal. "Hoffa gets away with too much as it is," one woman said.

Political Polls and Democratic Processes

BEYOND QUESTIONS of methodology and accuracy there is the question whether present-day political polls help or hinder functioning of the democratic process. Have the published polls destroyed their former usefulness in reporting existing situations by themselves creating situations for others to report? Do they build up a heedless bandwagon effect? Do the private polls used in planning campaign strategy cause candidates for high office to set aside their own convictions in favor of positions that seem to promise maximum support at the polls?

[18] *Editor & Publisher*, Nov. 8, 1952, p. 25.

ARGUMENTS ON BANDWAGON EFFECT OF POLLS

Proponents of the theory that published results of polls create a bandwagon psychology argue that the leading candidate, by creating a "winning image," can unfairly roll over candidates better fitted for the job. This is a long-standing problem of democratic government but it may have been made more acute by the polls. Was it true, for example, as Nixon said before his nomination for President, that "it was the polls that beat Bob Taft"? Or was it inevitable that Eisenhower would get the G.O.P. nomination in 1952 regardless of the polls? Fenton has pointed out that Eisenhower had demonstrated his popularity in Gallup polls as early as 1947 and was the second choice of Republicans behind Dewey in 1948. Indeed, if the bandwagon was rolling, it was temporarily detoured in March 1952 when a Gallup poll put the senator ahead of the soldier.[19]

Believers in the bandwagon theory point to the effect of the polls on the buildup of Sen. Kennedy from 1956 to 1960 to the point where, despite considerable latent opposition to his nomination, he went into the Democratic convention with more than enough delegates to win. Rockefeller's decision not to oppose front-running Nixon has been attributed to a feeling that a Nixon bandwagon was too far ahead to be overtaken.

Those who discount the bandwagon theory always cite the 1948 election. If voters in that year were being swayed by a bandwagon effect, Dewey should have won in a walk because all the polls showed him far ahead of Truman—after trailing the President in the previous December. "If there was any election that should have been influenced by the polls," Richard Scammon has said, "it was '48. This was one in which everybody said Truman was going to lose—Crossley, Roper, Gallup. I don't know anyone that wasn't on that side." [20]

In the pre-convention campaign of 1948 Stassen's star rose rapidly in the Gallup poll until he held a 13-point edge over Dewey in May yet he failed to get the nomination. Then there are the cases of Wendell Willkie and Adlai Stevenson who came "virtually out of nowhere, so far as rank and file preferences were concerned, a few months

[19] John M. Fenton, *In Your Opinion* (1960), pp. 103-109.
[20] *U.S. News & World Report*, Oct. 10, 1960, p. 67.

before their nomination." [21]   Kefauver rose from 21 to 45 per cent in the 1952 Gallup ratings yet lost the Democratic presidential nomination to Stevenson.

Sen. Gore quoted Elmo Roper last Feb. 11 as saying that although he did not think the polls directly influenced voter preferences, he did think they could have an indirect effect on the outcome.   "I think they have an effect on the delegates to the national convention, and I think this is an unfortunate byproduct of our work. I think they also might have an effect on the candidate."

NATIONAL POLLS VS. STATE PREFERENTIAL PRIMARIES

Political polls have their greatest effect—and perhaps their greatest value—in the pre-convention period. There is no doubt, for example, that Gallup's "trial-heat" ratings of potential candidates perform a public service the electoral system itself is not geared to provide. As Joseph Alsop has said, "Dr. Gallup's findings certainly influence the fortunes of candidates for the presidential nominations almost as much as the primary elections and perhaps more." State primaries offer a test of candidate preferences only among the candidates actually entered, only among voters of one party, and only in the states where they are held, whereas the nation-wide polls can—and do—include all likely candidates within a party and test them in trial runs against possible opponents in the November election.

Although Gallup has welcomed evidence that the polls may be more influential than the presidential primaries in the choice of party standard bearers,[22] others are less favorably impressed. Kenneth Fink, director of the Princeton Research Service, is "disturbed" by the fact that the United States has no real national presidential primaries. "As a result, the polls, including our own—willy nilly—are in the position of practically determining who the presidential candidates for the major political parties are to be." [23]   On the other hand, Jackson Toby, a Rutgers University professor, believes that the primaries "are not well adapted to a crucial problem of nominating conventions—finding the best vote-getter the party can run." He adds

[21] Paul T. David, Ralph M. Goldman, Richard C. Bain, *The Politics of National Party Conventions* (1960), p. 310.

[22] George Gallup and Saul F. Rae, *The Pulse of Democracy* (1940), p. 140.

[23] Quoted by Sen. Gore in a Senate speech, Aug. 22, 1960.

where is this 'how-to-win' formula ever submitted to the moral test of 'deserve-to-win.' " [27]

The basic argument boils down to the old question of whether democratically elected representatives should lead or follow their constituents. To put it another way, the question is: what is the real form of democracy? "Is it one," as Day writes, "in which office holders must be wholly sensitive to the wishes of the electorate, or is it one which demands that leaders have ideas, convictions and policies which they develop and test in open discussion with all their constituents?"

[27] John F. Day, "Do the Pollsters Control Your Vote?" *The New Leader,* Aug. 29, 1960, p. 3.